

THE FUSING POINT

By Charles Neville Buck

Drawing by William Berger

OCCASIONALLY you meet a man who is willing to put his theory to the touch even where the test involves life and death—and his own life and death.

The young Marquise de Merville had one of those gentle hearts that love to love. It had gladly and wholly surrendered itself to Merville after one joyous summer at Newport. It requires a high and dashing order of wooing to excite Newport; but there was a unique flavor of impetuosity and knightliness in the method of the gallant young foreigner which had succeeded not only in persuading her but had also laid the spell of its chivalrous ardor on all those who love a lover. Folk who in general see a menace in "foreign alliances" saw in this particular case an appropriate dénouement. It was eminently proper that a man should cross the world to win such a bride, and it was fortunate that he—not she—brought the wealth.

She had left her native America for a honeymoon in Spain and later for her husband's house in Paris. She had no deeper trouble in those days than a vague sense of the unreality of so much happiness and the equally vague foreboding that it could not last in a world that many philosophers agree is based upon a principle of vicissitude and suffering. Then, as though in vindication of this bitter creed, had come the quarrel between the Marquis and Comte de la Periet, a survivor of an unlively cult—now, fortunately, almost extinct, but unfortunately not quite so.

Periet was a bully *de luxe*, a consummately skilled duelist, who invited personal difficulties for the mere glorification of assured victory. Of course after the early morning meeting there had been some necessary secrecy; but the Marquis died of his wounds, and the Marquise, all unconscious of her blond loveliness in mourning, wrote over the door of her life, "Ichabod—the glory is departed."

NOW a year later she was returning from a visit in America to her desolated home in France. A slender old man with erect shoulders and gray hair, who was pacing the deck with his cigar and vague regrets because to-morrow the ship would reach Cherbourg, passed the steamer chair where she sat looking wistfully out at the dull, oily heaving of the sea, her book forgotten in her lap and her eyes moist. Suddenly he wheeled and coming back dropped into the vacant seat at her side.

"Do you know, my child," he said as he slowly drew off one of his gloves and sat smoothing it on his knee, "you remind me of verses?"

She looked up with a weary smile. There was something in the manner of this man, already starting down the shady slopes of life, that made one wish to lay her tired head on his shoulder and tell him all her troubles.

He quoted slowly:

The Empress too had a tear in her eye—

You'd have said that her fancy had gone back again,

For one moment under the old blue sky,

To the old glad life in Spain.

"The old glad life in Spain!" It was that of which she had been thinking, and no matter what she was now she had been an Empress then, if happiness can crown one as well as meaner diadems. There was a gasping catch in her throat, and for a moment she could not speak.

Colonel Treavor leaned over and laid his finger on her elbow. "Many years ago two boys were at school together in Virginia," he spoke with the seeming of abstraction. "It was when Breckenridge was studying how to check Sigel, and the school was the Virginia Military Institute. The world knows the story of the Newmarket Cadets; but the phase I speak of you may not have heard. The Confederacy needed men, and the cadets were men that day, even if they were really only lads who should rather have been at their mothers' knees than on the battlefield. The boys were put there because they were drilled until they were letter perfect, and the rest of the formation needed a steady unit on which to guide. Across the wheat field was a federal battery, and as they went forward a shell burst. A half-dozen boys of from fourteen to seventeen fell, and many others went down in the next few minutes. The survivors took that gun, and when they came back collected the wounded they had left. They had lost twenty per cent. of their class rolls. One of those boys



Then the Colonel's Pistol
Came Up Once More—
for the Last Time.

carried back a roommate who was wounded and saved his life. The boy who carried him back was your father. The boy he saved was I. If I can in anyway serve you, you need only speak."

The young woman turned her head and studied the face of the old man at her side. They had several times talked together during the voyage; but this was the first occasion of striking a personal note. What she wanted now was to talk to some one, to relieve her distress by reciting it, and as she did so he listened silently, but with grave nods of comprehensive sympathy. At last her voice hardened and her eyes glittered.

"It was murder!" she said desperately. "If I could avenge it, I should. I would kill him! And he is a passenger on this ship!"

The Colonel looked up and scrutinized her delicate features, for the moment hardened by anger, almost lustful for revenge. "I know," he said. "It would be hard for you to feel otherwise. He should be punished. Without doubt such bullies should be punished. Yet how? It was quite in conformity with the code. One must quarrel with the system." He looked at the sullen head-swell that moved across the restless bosom of the Atlantic and the pitching course of the small tramp near the horizon off to port, which was the only break in the world of oily sea and leaden sky.

"Some day," he went on, "he will meet some one who will avenge the others. It is the inevitable end of such men."

"That doesn't satisfy me!" she protested. "I want him punished as he deserves. I want him to feel all that he has made others feel. Oh, not just the men he has killed,—they died bravely enough, I dare say,—but those who were left behind! It is those who are left behind that have the heartbreak."

AS she spoke two men strolled forward from the smokeroom swathed in heavy ulsters. One was tall and middle aged, though he still retained his figure with that carefully preserved seeming that characterizes some Frenchmen. His face was hard and his mustache belligerently waxed and pointed upward. There sat on his eyes and lips a satirical smile which seemed habitual.

At his side paced a young American of the tourist type. He was still a boy, and was evidently flattered by the attention and notice of De Periet. One could see how adolescently he realized, and with what empty pride, that he was being accepted in companionship by a man who not only wore a title, but who—if such things were managed among gentlemen as they are among professional sports—would have also the right to buckle about his middle a championship belt for many victorious *affaires d'honneur*.

The girl glanced up and her blue eyes became harder as she turned them quickly aside. The strollers looked over toward Colonel Treavor; but, with recognition of his companion and of the unseeing blankness of his gaze, the Frenchman turned his own indifferently seaward and the boy arrested the motion of his hand to his cap. The two passed on, and neither the girl nor the

Colonel spoke until the silence had become painful, and the arrival of the deck steward with tea brought a welcome diversion. The Colonel watched her sip her tea and nibble at the white fruit cake as he smoked his cigar.

Then at last, when he had talked of inconsequential matters until he had persuaded her to smile, he rose and went to the smokeroom. The seats about the center and the many stalls were crowded; but at last the Colonel found a compartment vacant except for the boy, who had been on deck and was now alone. He dropped down and ordered brandy and soda. While he reflected in silence two other men came into the place. One of them was Comte de Periet. The other was also a Frenchman. Colonel Treavor recognized him as a retired army officer whose face he remembered from other visits to Paris. It was a face seen often among the boulevardiers on Sunday afternoons. During the trip he and Periet had been well nigh inseparable. The man was Captain Faurette, and the Colonel recalled having read his name as De Periet's second in at least one personal encounter.

The two newcomers, flushed from the sharp sea breeze, stood for a few moments looking for places, amid the chatter of several poker games and the loud discussions on the varied topics that serve to kill an afternoon at sea. Finally, with a slight bow and a murmured apology for the intrusion, De Periet and his companion took the two vacant places on the cushions of the Colonel's stall.

Colonel Treavor acknowledged the courtesy with a somewhat stiff nod and sat studying his glass with a manner of aloofness as the other three drifted into loquacity. When once or twice some one addressed him directly, he had to ask that the question be repeated before he could answer. His courtesy was perfect; but it was evident that the quiet old man with the distinguished face was far away with thoughts of his own. He obviously regarded with equal indifference the discussion of the day's run, the prospect of an Anglo-German War, the advance in aviation, and the latest star at the Opéra Comique.

The manners of Comte de Periet were also faultless; yet it was not possible for him to let conversation flow at random longer than a half-hour, and before it had rambled that far he was shaping it, guiding it subtly into channels where his wide personal experience might have the chance to give him the center of the stage. When talk came into fields where he could say "I chanced to be present," or "I was privileged to observe," he felt that he was at his best.

IT was the boy, in his enthusiasm and avidity for learning of new things, who brought forward the discussion of courage in the abstract and at once converted the loquacity of Monsieur le Comte into an electric fountain of conversational display.

"Courage," he said promptly, "is not a positive quality at all. Quite the contrary, it is negative. It is merely the absence of fear. It is only the man who

has fear left out of his character's index who can be truly called brave. Fear is a disease. The most famous duelist in Europe paused impressively, with the air of having spoken the final word.

"Yet there are so many kinds of courage and so many kinds of cowardice," argued the youth, "and so often they go hand in hand!"

The Frenchman shook his head. "I cannot grant it. It has been my experience that the reverse is true."

Colonel Treavor looked inquiringly about the trio of interested faces. He had not been a party to their conversation. Now he for the first time volunteered an opinion, and the others turned to listen.

"In the times of my military experience, years ago," he hazarded, "observation brought me to an opposite opinion. If you gentlemen will permit me to come into your discussion?" The Colonel spoke with such a gravely courteous smile and paused so naively for permission to proceed that to have done otherwise would have been grotesquely impolite. Monsieur le Comte smiled with ingratiating candor.

"Then Monsieur has had military experience?" he inquired with deferential interest.

"A little, in the Civil War."

"We should be honored to hear your opinion, Monsieur."

Compte de Periet touched the bell and gave orders, only the Colonel declining his invitation.

"It seems to me that every man who lives," went on the veteran of the Confederate army, "comes to a time, if tested far enough, when his physical courage deserts him. At such a moment the man whose courage is physical alone becomes the whipped dog, the victim of unreasoning panic. To say that a man has never reached that point is to say that he has not been far enough tried. The man that I would prefer for the hazardous detail is the man who is afraid, but is more afraid of dishonor; who remains, though he remains quaking."

The Frenchman shook his head. "In some slight experience with danger," he said, "I cannot remember

a single circumstance that bears out that theory."

The self assertiveness was submerged in the manner of speaking; but Colonel Treavor, thinking of the slim woman in black on the deck outside, flushed slightly, though he spoke with dispassionate calmness.

"I read in a book once of a man who bled to death without a vein or an artery being punctured. He was only blindfolded and water at the temperature of blood was dripped on his wrists. Men talked of how he was bleeding to death—and he died with every symptom of having had his arteries severed."

"If the account was a true one, he was a coward," declared Periet without hesitation.

"I also read in a paper recently of a workman who fell from a scaffolding," went on the old man placidly. "In falling he caught on a projecting beam by his clothing and hung suspended. A bottle of coffee in his overalls pocket broke and dripped. He was safe; but when they reached him he was dead, and the physician found every symptom of his having bled to death. There was no abrasion."

"He also was a coward. I should be willing to submit to such a test," laughed Periet.

Faurette said nothing; but from time to time nodded his head with Gallic energy in support of the words that fell from the lips of Monsieur le Comte. His attitude was that of a satellite attendant in the orbit of a greater luminary.

"Such a test would be brutal," reflected Treavor. "It would be death by torture."

"It would be without danger to the brave man," persisted the duelist.

"Courage," said Colonel Treavor slowly, almost as though speaking to himself, "is a sort of metal in the soul. It has its fusing point. In some souls the metal is harder, in some softer. That means only that the fusing point is higher or lower, nothing more."

The Count raised his glass to his lips and sipped the contents, then as he set it down he once more shook his head. "If I were appointed by Heaven to punish a brutal malefactor," went on the Colonel as though car-

rying his argument into the realm of the hypothetical, "I fancy I should choose some such means of fulfilling my mission."

"You may fuse or melt lead or zinc," contended the man who had met a dozen adversaries on the field; "but I maintain that courage, true courage, is of steel."

"Steel has its fusing point."

"If you will pardon the criticism, the theory appears to me ridiculous." Periet was still polite; but his antagonism was stirred, and he was not accustomed to tempering his utterances.

COLONEL TREEVOR leaned back at ease against the embossed leather at the back of his seat. His eyes looked away almost dreamily, his voice was very quiet. "Ridiculous, Monsieur le Comte, is a strong word," he suggested.

The Count's dark face flushed suddenly and a wave of anger crossed his eyes. His manner was the manner of absolute and icy courtesy. "I hardly think I chose the wrong word, though I grant my English to be deficient. I think it was the word I intended to employ."

Captain Faurette scowled blackly; but Colonel Treavor was still leaning back at ease reflectively drawing his gloves through his slender fingers. He looked up without excitement.

"Nevertheless, I must request you to withdraw it. I find it an objectionable word."

Periet sat upright and regarded the gentle, well molded face across the narrow slablike table with something like astonishment. Perhaps for once he felt something akin to sympathy for the man who was taking such reckless exception to his choice of words.

"Possibly Monsieur does not know me," he said. "I am Jacques de Periet, and I am seeking no difficulty."

"I must repeat my requirement that the word be retracted. The reputation and personality of Monsieur le Comte are well known to me," was the uncompromising reply.

"Then," the Frenchman paused and shrugged his

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THE ISLE OF BIRDS

By Charles G. D. Roberts

Drawings by Charles Livingston Bull

quiet in strange contrast to the ear splitting volubility of their neighbors.

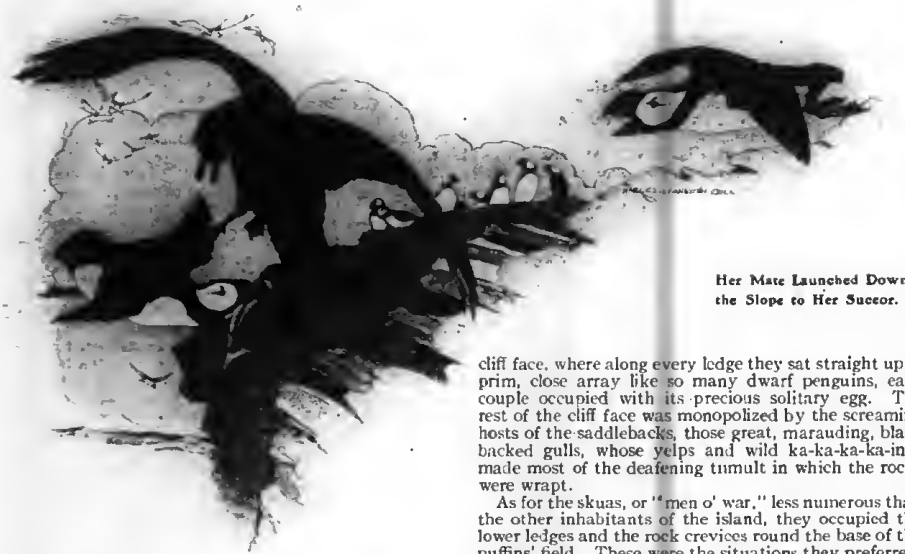
At the extreme left of the territory of the puffins, where the rocks broke abruptly, a tiny cleftful of earth made room for just one nest. The pair of puffins who had their burrows here were comparatively isolated, being some eight or ten feet apart from the crowded ranks of their kin. Their one big egg had been safely hatched. The ridiculous chick, all gaping beak and naked belly, the one object of their passionate solicitude, was thriving and hungry according to the finest traditions of infant puffinhood. The father at this moment was on guard at the mouth of the burrow, sitting solemnly erect on his webbed feet, the backs of his legs, and his stiff short tail; while the mother was away fishing beyond the white turmoil of the surf.

Surely the most curious figure of all the seabirds was his! For the body, it was not so far out of the ordinary, about the size of a big and sturdy cockatoo, white below and blackish brown above, sides of the face white, and a dingy white collar on the neck, the webbed feet of a duck, the stiff short tail of a penguin, very short strong wings, and a round head; but the beak was like a gaudy caricature. Curved from base to tip like a parrot's, it was as long and high as the head which it seemed to overweigh, and adorned apparently aimlessly with exaggerated horny ridges. Over each eye was a little wartlike horn, and at each corner of the beak, where it joined the skin of the face, a vivid red wrinkled excrescence, in shape a sort of rosette, of skinny flesh. Serviceable, to be sure, this beak was, obviously, whether for burrowing, fighting, or catching fish; but it could be imagined as performing all these offices equally well without its monstrous eccentricities of adornment.

Everywhere in front of the cliff face, over the ledges, above the white shuddering of the surf, and far out over the smooth, leaden gray rollers, the air was full of whirling and beating wings. These were the wings of the giant gulls and the skuas. The puffins did no more flying than was necessary, swift and straight from their nests out to the fishing grounds, and back with their prey to the nests. Above their little domain, therefore, the honeycombed south sloping field, there were no soaring or whirling wings, save for three or four pirate skuas, on the watch for a chance of robbery.

IT was of these marauders that the waiting puffin by his nest door, on the outskirts of the colony, had most dread. He was a wise old bird, of several seasons' experience and many a successful battle, and he knew that the light darting skua, though not much more than half the size of that bully of the cliffs, the saddleback, was much more dangerous than the latter because so much more courageous.

An impatient croak from the hungry nestling in the burrow made him poke his big beak inside and utter a low, chuckling admonition. When he withdrew his head and looked up he fluffed the feathers on his neck and opened his beak angrily. A large skua, of a rusty, mottled black all over, with long tail and long, hawk-



Her Mate Launched Down the Slope to Her Succor.

cliff face, where along every ledge they sat straight up in prim, close array like so many dwarf penguins, each couple occupied with its precious solitary egg. The rest of the cliff face was monopolized by the screaming hosts of the saddlebacks, those great, marauding, black backed gulls, whose yelps and wild ka-ka-ka-ings made most of the deafening tumult in which the rocks were wrapt.

As for the skuas, or "men o' war," less numerous than the other inhabitants of the island, they occupied the lower ledges and the rock crevices round the base of the puffins' field. These were the situations they preferred. If they had preferred the territory of the puffins or the auks, or even of the big bullying saddlebacks which were nearly twice their size, they would have taken it. But they neither desired nor knew how to dig burrows like the droll little puffins, and they valued their precious eggs too highly to wish to risk them on the narrow exposed shelves of the cliff face, where there was no room to make a proper nest. They took the places they wanted; but, as these were not places the other tribes wanted, there was no one to feel aggrieved. Saddleback, auk, and puffin, each tribe thought it had the pick of the island territory, and felt altogether satisfied with itself.

NOW, the weakest of these tribes was the tribe of the puffins. But one great strength they had, which fully made up for their deficiency in size and power. They knew how to burrow deep holes for their nests, wherein their eggs and nestlings were safe from the skuas and the saddlebacks. Every available inch of soil on the island was tunneled with these burrows, like a rabbit warren. At the bottom of each burrow was either one big solitary greenish egg, or a strange looking youngster with enormous head and beak and an insatiable appetite for fish.

At this season, late June, most of the puffins had hatched out their eggs. At the doorway of almost every burrow, therefore, was to be seen one of the parents on guard, while the other was away fishing to supply the insatiable demands of the chicks. In dense ranks, sitting erect like auks or penguins, the seriously grotesque little birds sat on their haunches, maintaining a businesslike

FAR out of the track of ships, in the most desolate stretch to be found in the North Atlantic, walled round with the ceaseless thunder of the surf and wailed about continually by innumerable seabirds, the islet thrust up its bleak rocks beneath a pale, unfriendly sky.

It was almost all rock, this little island, gray pinnacles of rock, ledges upon ledges of rock, and one high, sunrise facing cliff of rock, seamed with transverse crevices and shelves. Only on the gentler southward slope was the rock frame of the island a little hidden. Here had gathered a few acres of mean, sandy soil, dotted sparsely with tufts of harsh grass which struggled into greenness at the bidding of a bitter and fog blighted June.

But this remote sterile isle, shunned even by the whalers because of the treachery of its envying reefs and tides, was by no means lifeless. Indeed, it was thronged, packed, clamorous, screaming, with life. It was a very paradise of the nesting seabirds. Every meager foot of it, rock and sand, was preempted and occupied by the myriad battalions of puffins, skuas, auks, and saddlebacks. The incessant clamor of their voices, harsh and shrill, overrode even the trampling of the surf.

Within the crowded little domain each tribe had its territory. The puffins—or "sea parrots," as some of the sailor folk call them, because of their huge hooked beaks—occupied the sandy slope, where they had their nests in deep burrows for protection against the robber skuas and saddlebacks. The auks had a corner of the

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The Fusing Point

Continued from page 5

shoulders as though to shake off all responsibility for the result, "then I must decline to amend my statement."

So quietly that the action did not excite the attention of the card players about them, Colonel Treavor leaned across the table, and said in a voice hardly more than a whisper, "I regret to inform you, sir, that in calling my theory ridiculous you seriously offend me—and that you also lie!"

The words needed no amplification. Periet for a moment looked on in incredulous surprise. Then he smiled and arched his brows with commiseration as he drew his cardcase from his pocket and handed the billet across to the man who was forcing a challenge. Colonel Treavor replied in kind.

"I regret," said the Count slowly, "that a gentleman of your age has found it necessary to insult me. In the premises I cannot act differently—the only reply is to challenge. If you have a friend of fewer years, I shall gladly accept a substitute on the field. I hope that Captain Faurette here will consent to act as my second."

Faurette bowed his willingness. Colonel Treavor rose slowly from the table. "Monsieur le Comte is courteous," he said. "I shall be my own principal. We reach Cherbourg to-morrow. I go direct to Paris. As we are at sea, I am not to-day able to name a friend who will act as my second. My address will be the Hotel Ritz, and there I shall have some one in every way qualified to arrange details with Captain Faurette."

Monsieur le Comte de Periet bowed gravely, also rising. "The plan is perfectly satisfactory," he responded in a low voice. "I am entirely willing that the concluding arrangements be made in Paris." He turned to the others. "I am sure," he suggested, "that we need not request you gentlemen to regard this matter as confidential?"

Both the others bowed, though the boy's face flushed with excitement. He was seeing something in life that had heretofore belonged in his experience exclusively to the pages of books.

ON deck Colonel Treavor walked forward and, finding the Marquise where he had left her, dropped again into the chair at her side. The leaden sky was now piled high with slate-gray clouds; but at the edge of the world they broke into rifts where the sun was sinking close to the water, dyeing the west with broad broken hands of orange and rose. Across the swelling, white capped sea came a ladder of reflection with rungs of gold.

Colonel Treavor smiled at the girl. "My child," he said, his eye lighting with reminiscence, "you look very much as your mother did before her marriage. I was your father's best man." He paused and laughed as he bit the end of a fresh cigar. "And it was not my fault," he added, "that at that same wedding he was not my best man."

DUELING is not so open to-day as in times when editorial writers of Paris were wont in advance to commiserate with some unfortunate who seemed to be going to the certainty of death at the point of a celebrated blade. Yet the doings of Comte de Periet were sufficiently well known to excite interest, and in the cafés along the Champs Elysées there were a few intimates of the duelist who spoke together in small knots of the event of the morrow.

It was a somewhat strange arrangement. Major Burton, who acted for Colonel Treavor, had explained to Captain Faurette that the American principal wished terms that were hardly ordinary. As the challenged party, this was his right. He had chosen pistols at short range. The principals were to stand back to back, and on the word "Wheel!" to confront each other as they did in the form of code duello that formerly obtained in the Southern States. But there was to be a difference. Colonel Treavor was not a duelist. He had had of late small practice with firearms and was slow of movement. Therefore, it was stipulated that after the order to wheel each principal might consult his pleasure, firing at once or at leisure. There was no limit of time; but each weapon was to carry only a single load. Of course, if the first exchange failed to satisfy both parties, there might be repetitions.

When this arrangement was related to Comte de Periet in his lodgings he laughed. He could not have planned the affair more satisfactorily himself.

"When I have fired, Faurette," he declared, "this gentleman may have an eternity if he chooses; but it is probable that his eternity will be spent too far away to make him dangerous—unless," facetiously

added the duelist, "his ghost pursues me." And the Frenchman crossed himself with devoutness.

THOSE in charge of the matter had selected a place of sufficient isolation. It was a small opening in the woods, and as the morning dawned gray and chilly the small party gathered there, Colonel Treavor as grave as usual, Monsieur le Comte debonair and smiling. The surgeon laid out his instruments with professional care. Two other men, one of them the American boy of the steamer, stood rigidly upright nearby.

The seconds inspected the weapons in due formality, and as they did so Captain Faurette seemed surprised at some discovery, though after a brief conference with Major Burton he expressed himself as satisfied. Periet stripped to his shirt and stood forward in all the lithe muscularity that years of swordplay had given him. As he was deliberately turning back his sleeves over sinewy fore arms his second asked him some question in a low tone, and despite his previous outward show of courtesy the inherent quality of the bully gained momentary supremacy. The duelist raised his voice loud enough to carry across the narrow intervening space of dewy sod to the ears of his antagonist.

"I feel entirely well, thank you, *mon ami*, and it gives me much contentment that I shall this morning kill another Yankee."

The words went with a sneering laugh, and the man who had been a cadet at Newmarket reddened to his cheekbones; but he gave no indication of having heard. Only when the men walked out to the marked spot did he address the other, and then it was in a voice as self contained as that which had governed his talk in the smokeroom.

"If you please, Monsieur le Comte," he said, "you are in error." His eyes broke into blaze for a moment and the years since Lee's surrender were forgotten. "I am not a Yankee. I am a Scottish Virginian, and whether or not you kill me is to be demonstrated."

The Frenchman made a low bow, and his smile tilted the waxed ends of his mustache more aggressively upward. "I felicitate Monsieur le Colonel upon his optimism."

Across the meadows the morning mist was hanging wet and raw. The line of chestnut trees at Colonel Treavor's front were dripping heavy dew. His hand, hanging at his side, held the weapon loaded with a single charge. Behind him stood his adversary balancing himself on the ball of his right foot, his weapon nicely nestling in his palm, his finger on the trigger, his attitude one of alertness, readiness.

The older man was thinking back. Never had he shed blood unless on the field of battle. Perhaps that was why his thoughts now went back to the wheat fields with fleecy clouds of shells bursting overhead and the drum of rifle fire and booming of artillery to the front. It would seem that his fighting came at the beginning and the end of life.

Then he straightened as he heard the words of the counting.

"One—two—three! Fire!"

AS he came about Treavor heard the sharp bark of Periet's pistol and felt a sting along the ribs at his left side. He knew that the other had fired a fraction too impetuously; that had he waited a moment longer the shot would have been fatal; but that as it was it struck its human billet before it had turned to face him fully and had inflicted nothing more than a glancing wound. On Periet's face sat an expression of surprise. He had been quite sure!

Colonel Treavor did not at once raise his own weapon. There was time enough.

He stood for a moment gazing at his adversary, his own pistol still hanging at his side. Across the Frenchman's face came a sudden look of astonishment. Monsieur le Comte de Periet had fought men on various fields; but he had never before stood facing an executioner who cruelly took his time. Then Colonel Treavor raised his piece slowly, sighted it laboriously, not at the heart but at the head. Monsieur le Comte de Periet waited, forcing a smile; but slowly the blood went out of his face and the smile became that of a plaster cast, stiff and pained.

Monsieur le Comte was awaiting the death bullet. He was thinking, as he suddenly came to know, with an agony of suspense, of many things that do not make death easy. He was realizing that the bullet would strike him full in the face, would mangle his features. He suddenly remembered with nauseating horror a peasant who had committed suicide after bungling fashion by a pistol bullet in the forehead. Why did not this man shoot him in the heart, as a gentleman

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should be shot? He had no wish to die like an ignorant, love smitten peasant in a dirty blouse!

Still Colonel Treevor interminably sighted his weapon. Finally he lowered it. It appeared that his wrist had tired. After all, there was no hurry. Why should he not rest and so make his aim surer?

PERIET felt his knees grow weak. Then a terrible fear assailed him and beat insistently upon his brain. It was the fear of fear. What if he should faint like a timid schoolgirl at commencement before the trigger was finally drawn? He had prayed in an agony of impatience for the sharp report and the blackness, and now he must begin afresh to brace his resolution.

Colonel Treevor was slowly moving his pistol hand back and forth, drawing from his wrist the cramp of the long aim. Periet heard the gasp of the two onlookers and the physician who stood waiting. His eyes ranging, though his face was held straight to the front, caught the statuesqueness of their unnatural attitudes. He knew how the murderer feels as he kneels waiting beneath the raised blade of the guillotine, and suddenly he felt oppressed with the realization that he himself was only a different type of murderer.

The Count heaved back his shoulders, which seemed burdened with the load of Atlas, and set his face. He clung desperately to the grim smile; but he knew that it had become a miserable smirk and that under the gray pallor of his cheeks showed the greenish cast of sickened terror. Something in his throat seemed to be struggling to burst out, and he knew that which struggled there was a scream. He would not after all die unafraid. He would be visibly, palpably dying the coward's death—and all because he had for an antagonist a man who was pleased to toy with his life and torture him with delay!

He saw his adversary vaguely. Treevor seemed to have grown heroically tall and to stand wavering, a thing of gigantic proportions. The hand that for the second time leveled the pistol seemed to reach across the space between and press the weapon—this time close to his breast. He cast a quick glance, as though seeking reassurance, toward the stiffly erect Faurette; but Faurette's pale face was an impenetrable mask and was turned toward the Colonel.

Then came an eternity. Periet stood rigidly enough, but with the condition that a fraction of a second might bring collapse, and again after an eternity his adversary paused and dropped the pistol at his side to rest.

Compte de Periet gritted his teeth. His tongue was clamped between them, and he tasted the blood though he could not feel the pain. Already he seemed to be inwardly bleeding from every artery.

THEN the pistol came up once more. There was once more a long, careful interval of aiming, until the muzzle was directly on his heart. He steeled himself to wait; then he caught, in the thousandth part of a second, a tongue of flame. He never heard the report. The cry that burst from his lips was rather a cry of relief than of fear or pain. He wheeled wildly about as a top turns on its axis, and fell at length, face downward, his fingers convulsively clawing the sod.

A groan of relief went up from those standing about, relief from the broken suspense. The physician was instantly at the side of the prostrate figure. Compte de Periet lay on his face, and his arms were outstretched as though desperately clinging to the earth from which he had been so terribly banished. The surgeon seized one wrist and felt for the pulse.

"Dead!" he announced with crisp brevity.

Then they turned him, and into the faces of those bending over came bewilderment. On the fine textured whiteness of the linen shirt was not to be found a single stain save that of the earth to which he had fallen!

In excited haste the physician tore open the clothing and examined the chest. There were scars of old battles, rapier slashes long since healed, the mark of a bullet that had once grazed the ribs—nothing more.

"Mon Dieu!" whispered the doctor. "There is no wound!"

Colonel Treevor came slowly forward. "Gentlemen," he explained, "his second and mine will bear me out in my statement. I fired a blank cartridge."

Faurette, kneeling on the wet grass, turned his face away from the lifeless one of his friend and covered his eyes with his hands as he sobbed bitterly.

"Monsieur le Colonel speaks the truth," he said somewhat brokenly. "Even steel has its fusing point!"

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